

The Taste of Freedom

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The clarion call of our present age is, without doubt, the call for freedom. Perhaps at no time in the past history of mankind so much as at present has the cry for freedom sounded so widely and so urgently, perhaps never before has it penetrated so deeply into the fabric of human existence.

In response to man's quest for freedom, far-reaching changes have been wrought in almost every sphere of his activity — political, social, cultural and religious. The vast empires which once sprawled over the earth, engulfing like huge mythical sea-monsters the continents in their grasp, have crumbled away and disintegrated, as the peoples over whom they reigned have risen up to repossess their native lands — in the name of independence, liberty and self-rule.

Old political forms such as monarchy and oligarchy have given way to democracy — government by the people — because every man demands the right to contribute his voice to the direction of his collective life. Long-standing social institutions which kept man enthralled since before the dawn of history — slavery, serfdom, the caste-system — have now disappeared, or are rapidly disappearing, while accounts of liberation movements of one sort or another daily deck the headlines of our newspapers and crowd the pages of our popular journals.

The arts, too, bear testimony to this quest for greater freedom: free verse in poetry, abstract expression in painting, and atonal composition in music, are just a few of the innovations which have toppled restrictive traditional structures to give the artist open space in his drive for self-expression. Even religion has not been able to claim immunity from this expanding frontier of liberation. No longer can systems of belief and codes of conduct justify themselves, as in the past, on the grounds that they are commanded by God, sanctified by scripture, or prescribed by the priesthood. They must now be prepared to stand out in the open, shorn of their veils of sanctity, exposed to the critical thrust of the contemporary thinker who assumes himself the right to free inquiry and takes his own reason and experience for his court of final appeal. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of action have become the watchwords of our public life, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience the watchwords of our private life. In any form in which it obtains, freedom is guarded as our most precious possession, more valuable than life itself. "Give me liberty or give me death," an American patriot exclaimed two hundred years ago. The succeeding centuries have echoed his demand.

As though in response to mankind's call for wider frontiers of freedom, the Buddha offers to the world His Teaching, the Dhamma, as a pathway to liberation as applicable today as it was when first proclaimed twenty-five centuries ago.

"Just as in the great ocean there is but one taste — the taste of salt — so in this Doctrine and Discipline (*dhammavinaya*) there is but one taste — the taste of freedom": with these words the Buddha vouches for the emancipating quality of His doctrine.

Whether one samples water taken from the surface of the ocean, or from its middling region, or from its depths, the taste of the water is in every case the same — the taste of salt. And again, whether one drinks but a thimble-full of ocean water, or a glass-full, or a bucket-full, the same salty taste is present throughout. Analogously with the Buddha's Teaching, a single flavor — the flavor of freedom (*vimuttirasa*) — pervades the entire Doctrine and Discipline, from its beginning to its end, from its gentle surface to its unfathomable depths. Whether one samples the Dhamma at its more elementary level — in the practice of generosity and moral discipline, in acts of devotion and piety, in conduct governed by reverence, courtesy, and loving-kindness; or at its intermediate level — in the taintless supramundane knowledge and deliverance realized by the liberated saint, in every case the taste is the same — the taste of freedom.

If one practices the Dhamma to a limited extent, leading a house-hold life in accordance with righteous principles, then one experiences in return a limited measure of freedom; if one practices the Dhamma to a fuller extent, going forth into the homeless state of monkhood, dwelling in seclusion adorned with the virtues of a recluse, contemplating the rise and fall of all conditioned things, then one experiences a fuller measure of freedom; and if one practices the Dhamma to its consummation, realising in this present life the goal of final deliverance, then one experiences a freedom that is measureless.

At every level the flavor of the Teaching is of a single nature, the flavor of freedom. It is only the degree to which this flavor is enjoyed that differs, and the difference in degree is precisely proportional to the extent of one's practice. Practice a little Dhamma and one reaps a little freedom, practice abundant Dhamma and one reaps abundant freedom. The Dhamma brings its own reward of freedom, always with the exactness of scientific law.

Since the Dhamma proposes to provide a freedom as complete and perfect as any the modern world might envisage, a fundamental congruence appears to obtain between man's aspiration for expanding horizons of liberty and the possibilities he might realize through the practice of the Buddha's Teaching. Nevertheless, despite this concordance of ends, when our contemporaries first encounter the Dhamma they often find themselves confronted at the outset by one particular feature which, clashing with their familiar modes of thought, strikes them intellectually as a contradiction and

emotionally as a stumbling block. This is the fact that while the Dhamma purports to be a pathway to liberation, a Teaching pervaded throughout by 'the taste of freedom,' it yet requires from its followers the practice of a regimen that seems the very antithesis of freedom — a regimen built upon discipline, restraint, and self-control. "On the one hand we seek freedom," our contemporaries object, "and on the other we are told that to reach this freedom our deeds, words, and thoughts must be curbed and controlled." What are we to make of this astonishing thesis the Buddha's Teaching appears to advance: that to achieve freedom, freedom must be curtailed? Can freedom as an end really be achieved by means that involve the very denial of freedom?

The solution to this seeming paradox lies in the distinction between two kinds of freedom — between freedom as license and freedom as spiritual autonomy. Contemporary man, for the most part, identifies freedom with license. For him, freedom means the license to pursue undisturbed his impulses, passions and whims. To be free, he believes, he must be at liberty to do whatever he wants, to say whatever he wants and to think whatever he wants. Every restriction laid upon this license he sees as an encroachment upon his freedom; hence a practical regimen calling for restraint of deed, word, and thought, for discipline and self-control, strikes him as a form of bondage. But the freedom spoken of in the Buddha's Teaching is not the same as license. The freedom to which the Buddha points is spiritual freedom — an inward autonomy of the mind which follows upon the destruction of the defilements, manifests itself in an emancipation from the mold of impulsive and compulsive patterns of behavior, and culminates in final deliverance from samsara, the round of repeated birth and death.

In contrast to license, spiritual freedom cannot be acquired by external means. It can only be attained inwardly, through a course of training requiring the renunciation of passion and impulse in the interest of a higher end. The spiritual autonomy that emerges from this struggle is the ultimate triumph over all confinement and self-limitation; but the victory can never be achieved without conforming to the requirements of the contest — requirements that include restraint, control, discipline and, as the final price, the surrender of self-assertive desire.

In order to bring this notion of freedom into clearer focus, let us approach it via its opposite condition, the state of bondage, and begin by considering a case of extreme physical confinement. Suppose there is a man locked away in a prison, in a cell with dense stone walls and sturdy steel bars. He is tied to a chair — his wrists bound together by rope behind his back, his feet locked in shackles, his eyes covered by a blindfold and his mouth by a gag. Suppose that one day the rope is unfastened, the shackles loosened, the blindfold and gag removed. Now the man is at liberty to move about the cell, to stretch his limbs, to speak, and to see. But though at first he might imagine that he is free, it would not take him long to realize that true freedom is still as distant as the clear blue sky beyond the stoned and steel bars of his cell.

But suppose, next, that we release the man from prison, set him up as a middle-class householder, and restore to him his full body of rights as a citizen of the state. Now he can enjoy the social and political freedom he lacked as a prisoner; he can vote, work, and travel as he likes, can even hold public office. But there still remains — in the form of his responsibilities, his burden of duties, his limitations of power, pleasure, and prestige — a painful discrepancy between the freedom of mastery for which he might personally yearn, and the actuality of the situation which circumstances has doled out to him as his drearier lot. So let us, as a further step, lift our man up from this middle-class routine, and install him, to his pleasant surprise upon the throne of a world monarch, a universal emperor exercising sovereignty over all the earth. Let us place him in a magnificent palace, surrounded by a hundred wives more beautiful than lotus-flowers, possessed of limitless resources of gold, land, and gems, endowed with the most sublime pleasures of the five senses. All power is his, all enjoyment, fame, glory, and wealth. He needs only express his will for it to be taken as command, need only utter a wish for it to be translated into deed. No obstruction to his freedom of license remains. But still the question stands: is he truly free? Let us consider the issue at a deeper level.

Three kinds of feelings have been pointed out by the Buddha: pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and neutral feeling, i.e., feeling which is neither pleasant nor painful. These three classes exhaust the totality of feeling, and one feeling of one class must be present on any given occasion of experience. Again, three mental factors have been singled out by the Buddha as the subjective counterparts of the three classes of feeling and described by him as *anusaya*, latent tendencies which have been lying dormant in the subconscious mental continua of sentient beings since beginningless time, always ready to crop up into a state of manifestation when an appropriate stimulus is encountered, and to subside again into the state of dormancy when the impact of the stimulus has worn off.

These three mental factors are lust (*raga*), repugnance (*patigha*), and ignorance (*avijja*), psychological equivalents of the unwholesome roots of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). When a worldling, with a mind untrained in the higher course of mental discipline taught by the Buddha, experiences a pleasant feeling, then the latent tendency to lust springs up in response — a desire to possess and enjoy the object serving as stimulus for the pleasant feeling. When a worldling experiences a painful feeling, then the latent tendency to repugnance comes into play, an aversion toward the cause of the pain. And when a worldling experiences a neutral feeling, then the latent tendency to ignorance — present but recessive on occasions of lust and aversion — rises to prominence, shrouding the worldling's consciousness in a cloak of dull apathy.

On whatever occasion the three latent tendencies to lust, repugnance, and ignorance are provoked by their corresponding feelings from their dormant condition into a state of activity, if a man does not make an effort to dispel them, does not strive to restrain, remove, and abandon them and bring them to nought, then they will persist in consciousness. If, as they persist in consciousness, he repeatedly yields to them, endorses them, and continues to cling to them, they will gather momentum, come to growth, and like a ball of flame flung upon a haystack, flare up from their

initial phase as feeble impulses into powerful obsessions which usurp from a man his capacity for self-control. Then, even if a man be, like our hypothetical subject, an emperor over the earth, he is inwardly no longer his own master but a servant at the bidding of his own defilements of mind.

Under the dominance of lust he is drawn to the pleasant, under the dominance of hate he is repelled by the painful, under the dominance of delusion he is confused by the neutral. He is bent up by happiness, bent down by sorrow, elated by gain, honor, and praise, dejected by loss, dishonor, and blame. Even though he perceives that a particular course of action can lead only to his harm, he is powerless to avoid it; even though he knows that an alternative course of action is clearly to his advantage, he is unable to pursue it. Swept on by the current of unabandoned defilements, he is driven from existence to existence through the ocean of samsara, with its waves of birth and death, its whirlpools of misery and despair. Outwardly, he may be a ruler over all the world, but in the court of consciousness he is still a prisoner. In terms of license he may be completely free, but in terms of spiritual autonomy he remains a victim of bondage in its most desperate form: bondage to the workings of a defiled mind.

Spiritual freedom, as the opposite of this condition of bondage, must therefore mean freedom from lust, hatred, and delusion. When lust, hatred, and delusion are abandoned in a man, cut off at the root so that they no longer remain even in latent form, then a man finds for himself a seat of autonomy from which he can never be dethroned, a position of mastery from which he can never be shaken. Even though he be a mendicant gathering his alms from house to house, he is still a king; even though he be locked behind bars of steel, he is inwardly free. He is now sovereign over his own mind, and as such over the whole universe; for nothing in the universe can take from him that deliverance of heart which is his inalienable possession. He dwells in the world among the things of the world, yet stands in perfect poise above the world's ebb and flow. If pleasant objects come within range of his perception he does not yearn for them, if painful objects come into range he does not recoil from them. He looks upon both with equanimity and notes their rise and fall. Toward the pairs of opposites which keep the world in rotation he is without concern, the cycle of attraction and repulsion he has broken at its base. A lump of gold and a lump of clay are to his eyes the same; praise and scorn are to his ears empty sounds. He abides in the freedom he has won through long and disciplined effort. He is free from suffering, for with the defilements uprooted no more can sorrow or grief fall upon his heart; there remains only that perfect bliss unsullied by any trace of craving.

He is free from fear, from the chill of anxiety which even kings know in their palaces, protected by bodyguards inside and out. And he is free from disease, from the sickness of the passions vexing and feverish that tie the mind in knots, from the sickness of samsara with its rounds of defilement, action, and result. He passes his days in peace, pervading the world with a mind of boundless compassion, enjoying the bliss of emancipation, or teaching fellow way-farers the path he himself has followed to the goal, in the calm certain knowledge that for him the beginningless trail of repeated births and deaths has been brought to a close, that he has reached the pinnacle of holiness and effected the cessation of all future becoming.

In its fullness, the freedom to which the Buddha points as the goal of His Teaching can only be enjoyed by him who has made the realization of the goal a matter of his own living experience. But just as salt lends its taste to whatever food it is used to season, so does the taste of freedom pervade the entire range of the Doctrine and Discipline proclaimed by the Buddha, its beginning, its middle, and its end. Whatever our degree of progress may be in the practice of the Dhamma, to that extent may the taste of freedom be enjoyed. It must always be borne in mind, however, that true freedom — the inward autonomy of the mind — does not descend as a gift of grace. It can only be won by the practice of the path to freedom, the Noble Eightfold Path.

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